

On the Home Front: Early Care and Education a Top Priority for Military Families

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Most military families, like their civilian peers, do not have access to high-quality early learning and care opportunities. This gap represents one of the most pressing needs for service members, their spouses and their young children.

Introduction

Securing quality early care and education (ECE) programs for their young children is vital to military parents at home and when deployed. Pre-K Now, in collaboration with other early childhood advocacy groups, commissioned a survey of military family members with children age five and younger, including Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve personnel or their spouses. The survey was designed to explore the needs and priorities military parents have for their children, the challenges they face in accessing services and the value they place on the programs currently available. This study, conducted in October 2010 by the Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, found that, most military families, like their civilian peers, do not have access to high-quality early learning and care opportunities. This gap represents one of the most pressing needs for service members, their spouses and their young children.

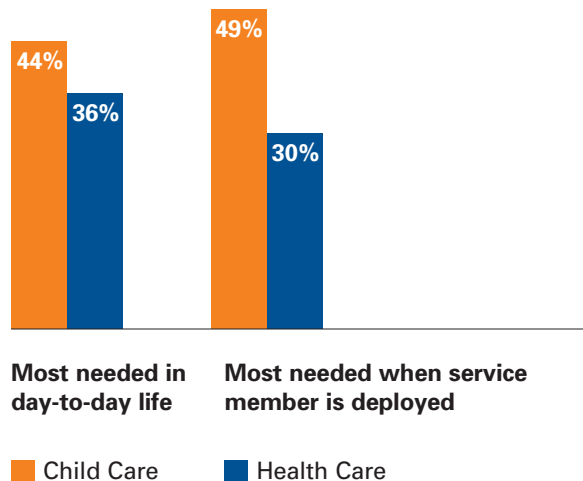
The shortage of quality ECE programs for military families is also a concern for federal policy makers and the Department of Defense (DoD). In the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Congress dedicated \$240 million for building new Child Development Centers (CDCs) on military bases.¹ These funds are a step in the right direction, but the survey results demonstrate that better policies and more support are needed at both the state and federal levels to ensure high-quality ECE is available to all military families, especially those who do not have easy access to military installations.

This brief presents the key findings of the survey and details specific steps state and federal leaders can take to provide the high-quality early childhood programs that servicemen and women themselves identify as critical to their families' stability at home and their focus and peace of mind on the job.

Key Findings

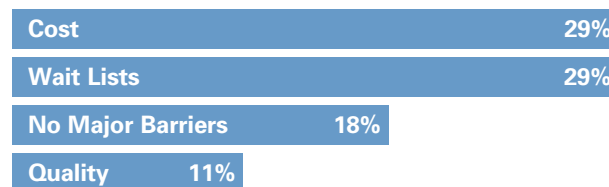
Need for Early Care and Education Greater than for Health Care

Military families indicated that they place the highest value on ECE, including the drop-in and respite services that provide quick and temporary relief to stressed families. According to respondents, the need for ECE trumps that of other family services offered through the military – even health care – by 8 percentage points. This margin widens during times of deployment.



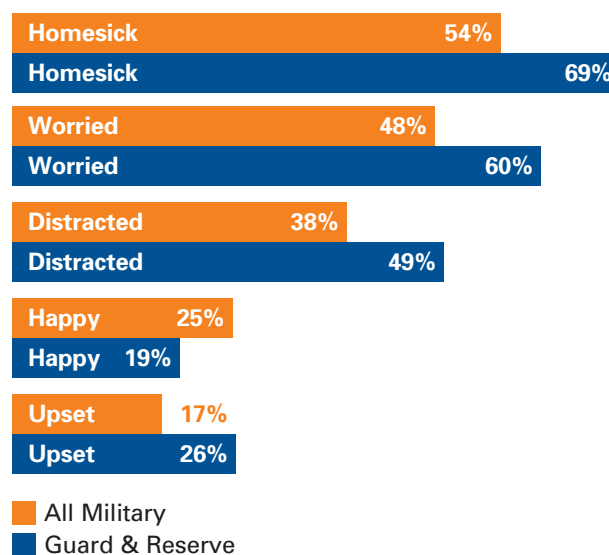
Access to CDC Services Remains a Challenge

The survey found that Child Development Centers on military installations are well liked by military families, but access remains a challenge. Like their civilian counterparts, military families struggle with wait lists for higher quality programs, including those offered on base.² Further, almost half of our nation's service members are in the National Guard and Reserves, and they typically do not live on or near official installations. These families, as well as those of geographically isolated Active Duty personnel, likely have little or no access to CDCs. These concerns indicate that both the Department of Defense and states need to direct more attention and action to increasing the availability and accessibility of ECE programs.



Job Concentration is Mission-Critical

Survey participants were asked how they feel when they think about their families during a deployment. In the military, the ability to concentrate on the job at hand can have mission-critical consequences. Among deployed respondents, about half report being worried about their families. This was particularly true for National Guard and Reserve personnel.

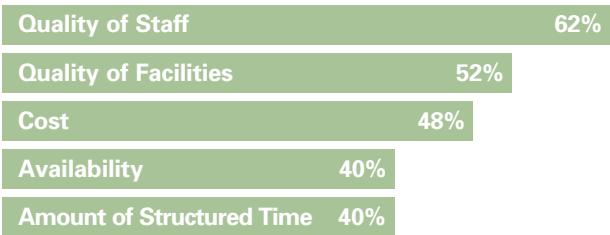


Key Findings

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Quality is Top Early Care and Education Priority

In keeping with their stated priorities, the data suggest that military parents, like all parents, weigh decisions about their children’s care and education critically and deeply. When selecting an early care and education center, parents and guardians consider location, cost and convenience, but the quality of the setting takes precedence. These findings indicate that military families’ priorities are consistent with what other independent research shows: that only high-quality programs produce strong benefits for young children, families and society.



Snapshot of Department of Defense Child Care Service

The U.S. Department of Defense currently has over 3.5 million military personnel, and more than 680,000 children age five and under are in military families.^a The Department of Defense provides a range of high-quality services for eligible families with young children, including:

- 800 CDCs on military bases worldwide that:
 - offer full-day, part-day and hourly care and education for children ages six weeks to 12 years;
 - are subsidized by DoD using a tiered fee schedule based on total family income; and
 - meet high quality standards for early childhood education with nearly 93 percent accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.^b
- A network of early care and education providers available to military families in their local communities, administered by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), for:
 - activated/deployed service members (including National Guard and Reserve) living off installation and
 - Active Duty (full-time, on- or off-installation) military personnel on a waiting list for military child care.
- Respite child care that provides temporary relief for military families and caregivers by enabling them to engage in daily activities. Services are offered depending on the needs of the families and the type of program available in a community.^c
- A special program to help seriously injured service members with young children.^d

a U.S. Department of Defense, “Demographics: Profile of the Military Community,” (Washington, DC: Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Military Community and Family Policy, 2008). <http://cs.mhf.dod.mil/content/dam/mhf/QOL-Library/Project%20Documents/MilitaryHOMEFRONT/Reports/2008%20Demographics.pdf>.

b “Child Development Centers,” National Military Family Association., <http://www.militaryfamily.org/get-info/support-children/child-care/child-development-centers.html>.
c MilitaryHOMEFRONT, “Respite Care,” U.S. Department of Defense, http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/portal/page/mhf/MHF/MHF_DETAIL_1?section_id=20.40.500.570.0.

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d Military.com, “Military Child Care,” Military Advantage, <http://www.military.com/benefits/resources/family-support/child-care>.

A Call for Further Action: Policy Recommendations

Frequent relocations and the cycle of deployment – prepare, separate and reunite – all cause disruptions that can have profound emotional and educational consequences for military families. Whether they serve in the Active Duty forces, National Guard or Reserves, parents need reliable access to high-quality early care and education to reduce worry, ease daily stresses and minimize the disruption caused by frequent and repeated deployments. Policy makers should consider adopting strategies that provide increased access to ECE services for the children of military personnel. To this end, we propose the following policy solutions.

1. Support Parents as Their Child's First Teachers and Strongest Advocates

Parents, whether military or civilian, are their child's first teachers. Policy makers should ensure that sustainable systems are in place to provide military parents and guardians with the information and resources they need to support their children's early development and learning.

2. Increase the Availability of Quality Infant and Toddler Care Services

The number of births in military families has increased notably since 2000. National data demonstrate that private care for infants and toddlers is more expensive than for older children,³ and 48 percent of requests through the national child care resource and referral system are for children three and younger.⁴ To meet the needs of military families with infants and toddlers, policy makers should expand:

- Referral services and financial assistance to help community providers improve the quality of services;
- Information about and access to voluntary, high-quality home visiting services for at-risk new and expectant families; and
- Training about the impact of deployments on the social and emotional health of infants and toddlers for professionals and individuals providing support and care for young children.

3. Include Military Children in Targeted State Pre-K Programs

For the children of military personnel, frequent relocations and parental deployments present a unique set of social, emotional and educational challenges. High-quality state-funded pre-kindergarten programs can provide stability and security and foster the skills these children need to cope with change and to be ready to succeed in school.⁵ However, because program eligibility and availability differ from state to state, some military families may lose access to state pre-k when they are relocated. Including military families in state-funded pre-k supports our servicemen and women, and in most cases, requires minimal changes to existing policy. To ensure access to quality pre-k programs wherever military personnel are stationed, policy makers should:

- Make military children eligible for state pre-k, and
- Ensure seamless transitions for incoming military children.

Woman from focus group of military family members who lived five miles or more from a military installation

My husband and I went through one deployment, and my daughter was three days old when he left. That was really hard. It was my first deployment. We had a new baby so I had to call in reinforcements... My mom and my sister flew in, and luckily, I had that support. I don't know what a new mom would do if she didn't have that support and her husband was gone.

A Call for Further Action: Policy Recommendations

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4. Educate Military Families about Current Eligibility Requirements

States and localities should assign an office or agency to collaborate with the military regarding outreach and information to military families about all available programs and services for which they are eligible. These include Head Start, Early Head Start and subsidized community-based high-quality early care and education services through programs such as Operation Military Child Care (OMCC) and Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN). A new Military Child Care Liaison Initiative funded by DoD and implemented in partnership with NACCRRA, to expand child care capacity and improve quality, may serve as a model for collaboration with state systems to address the child care and early learning needs of military families. The initiative is being piloted in 13 states.⁶

5. Encourage School Districts to Utilize Federal Impact Aid⁷ Funding

School districts that qualify for Federal Impact Aid dollars may use those funds to support pre-k.⁸ In districts where Impact Aid eligibility is due in whole or part to a high concentration of military children, policy makers and administrators should consider applying federal resources to offer early learning to that student population. Importantly, children of National Guard and Reserve personnel typically reside outside of school districts that would normally be eligible for Impact Aid. Therefore, funding for these students, for whom the need for pre-k programs is at least as great as children of Active Duty service members, must be allocated from other sources.



It's Time to Meet the Needs of Our Nation's Military Families

Military families are subject to stresses above and beyond those that most American families endure. Relocation, deployment, injury and even death are realities faced by our servicemen and women, their spouses and their children. This survey reveals that a shortage of quality early learning and care services for children birth to five is yet another stress for military personnel both at home and when deployed. Unlike many of the stresses military families face, federal and state policy makers can take concrete and sustainable steps to ensure military families have access to the high-quality, affordable early education and care programs they need to ease the strain of daily challenges and to be successful in the vital work they do for our nation.

Man from focus group of military family members on or near a military installation

The CDC has 20 spots a day that they fill up like that. We registered my daughter the first month we found out we were pregnant, and we are still waiting for a slot.



Methodology and Survey Respondent Demographics

This analysis represents the findings of a survey of 500 Active Duty, National Guard or Reserve service members or spouses of service members who have children younger than 10 years of age. Respondents completed an online survey from October 1 – 10, 2010 and were recruited by phone, e-mail and the Internet. The margin of error for this survey is +/-4.4 percent at the 95 percent level of confidence. The margin of error is higher for subgroups.

Individual interviews were conducted with five DoD personnel - one each from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force and National Guard - who oversee or work in child care programs for military families, including three Military Child Development Center (CDC) directors, one Child and Youth Services (CYS) director and one Child and Youth program manager. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted in Virginia Beach, VA on August 24, 2010 with parents of children under five who were service members themselves and/or the spouse of a service member. (The "On-Base" group lived on base or within five miles of the base, and the "Off-Base" group comprised those who lived more than five miles from the base).

The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies collaborated to jointly conduct the qualitative and quantitative research.

Endnotes

- ¹ Committee of Conference, "Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 1," (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), 464. http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_reports&docid=f:hr016.111.pdf.
- ² Gail L. Zellman et al., "Options for Improving the Military Child Care System," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008). http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/2008/RAND_OP217.pdf.
- ³ Personal communication with Siobhan K. Casey, Director, Military Projects, ZERO TO THREE.
- ⁴ NACCRRA, "Covering the Map: Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies Providing Vital Services to Parents Throughout the United States" (Arlington, VA: National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2008).
- ⁵ "Pre-K for Military Families: Honoring Service, Educating Children," in Research Series (Washington, DC: Pre-K Now, 2007). http://www.preknow.org/documents/Pre-KforMilitaryFamilies_Jul2007.pdf.
- ⁶ NACCRRA, "NACCRRA Partners with the Department of Defense to Expand Quality Community-Based Child Care Options for Military Families," National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, <http://www.naccrra.org/news/press-releases/73/>.
- ⁷ "The Impact Aid Program is designed to directly compensate local school districts for: (1) local revenue lost due to the presence of federally owned, and therefore tax-exempt, property and (2) costs incurred due to "federally connected" students, such as the children of armed services personnel working at a nearby military base." See: Federal Education Budget Project, "Federal Impact Aid Program," New America Foundation, <http://febp.newamerica.net/background-analysis/federal-impact-aid-program>.
- ⁸ "Title VIII - Impact Aid," National Association of Federally Impacted Schools, <http://nafisd.org/IA%20Law2001.htm>.

Acknowledgements

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The following groups provided guidance on this project:

- The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)
- National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA)
- National Military Family Association (NMFA)
- Pre-K Now
- ZERO TO THREE



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